

## Sunshine's v Stevie's by cherrysorry

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** (if childish fist-fighting qualifies as attempted murder), Alternate Universe - Everyone Lives/Nobody Dies, Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Attempted Murder, Billy Hargrove Being an Asshole, Billy Hargrove Has a Crush on Steve Harrington, Billy Hargrove Tries to Be a Better Person, Billy Hargrove is a Little Shit, Bisexual Steve Harrington, But also, Enemies to Friends to Lovers, Everyone except for Billy and Steve and Billy's Mom are just mentioned in passing, Gay Billy Hargrove, M/M, Rich Steve Harrington, Soft Billy Hargrove, Soft Steve Harrington, but so is Steve, food truck au, honestly

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Billy Hargrove, Billy Hargrove's Mother, Dustin Henderson, Jonathan Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

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**Summary:**

Billy and his Ma have been slinging grilled cheese on this three-mile strip of Californian paradise since he was growing in his milk teeth and getting them knocked out by the homophobic fuckheads from down the block.

So when Billy wakes up one morning, checks Ma's temperature, and cruises down to the dunes to see a new truck parked in Ma's spot—

He's not Harrington's biggest fan.

Things devolve pretty God damn quickly after that.

—

OR, the obligatory Food Truck AU that our moronic Hairspray Boys deserve.

# 1. Chapter 1

## Author's Note:

Inspired by the Food Truck AU requested by @readingalways on Tumblr.

Is it vain of Billy to feel self-conscious about trying to murder someone in fucking *flip flops*?

“I’m gonna rip your God damn head off, pretty boy!” Meanwhile his old rainbows *squeal* as he wrestles the asshole to the ground.

*Shit.* He really should’ve gone with his boots today, but it’s summertime and they’re spitting distance from the beach and *homicide wasn’t in the damn schedule for today.*

It’s because of Harrington, of course. It’s always fucking Harrington. He’s the head baker, cook, and asshole apparent of *Stevie’s Bees*, the honey-themed pastry and comfort food truck that’s been parked in Billy’s spot on the same block as Billy’s for the last *month*.

Before you ask, Harrington’s been able to duck a lawsuit by the skin of his teeth from *Stevi B’s Pizza Buffet* for years. *Why?* Because Steve’s daddy has the bankroll to ward off any lawyers trying to intrude on his son’s little... *pastime.*

Well, this is not just some God damn hobby for Billy. His Ma started the business when she was scraping by as a waitress at a shitty 24-hour dive bar. ‘Course they couldn’t afford a nanny, so Billy was left toddling in the back room and learned to read from the old newspapers they’d used to store the glassware.

So when Billy wakes up one morning, checks Ma’s temperature, and cruises down to the dunes to see a new truck and canteen worth a hundred thousand dollars parked in *Ma’s spot*—

He’s not Harrington’s biggest fan. Yet he at least *attempts* civility.

“New in town?,” Billy drawls, striding up to the fluffy-haired kid wiping down the mirrors of the new eatery. Billy thinks *eatery*, rather

than *truck*, because the gleaming behemoth in front of him is a fully loaded black-out canteen linked up to a mustard Volkswagen Westfalia. The oil used to tune up the thing is probably worth more than Billy's blood.

"Love the paint job, by the way." Yellow and black interlocking honeycombs. Nice, and almost certainly overpriced. The young, big-hearted couple across the street from Billy and Ma are mural artists. The women painted the truck for *pennies* (and a few lunches now and again when things took off.)

The guy finally turns around, which—wow. Those big brown eyes are awfully easy on Billy, even framed by oversized hipster glasses. The guy cocks his head, plucks something out of his ear: a headphone. Something nicer than an AirPods. He looks kinda pissy.

"*Dude*. I'm sorry but, you can't just show up, like, two hours late and expect me to pay you when I'm almost done setting up."

And here's the *thing*—Billy might still be poor, but he takes care of himself, alright? His hair's fluffed up all nice and he's wearing a button up and these khaki shorts that his Ma's patched up real good. He's even polished out most of the dinks in his thrift store boots.

He doesn't look like no five-dollar construction rat this trust funder pinched on Craigslist.

Billy nose crinkles up when he laughs, *soured*. "No, man. I actually work the other food truck on this block. Wanted to swing around and scope out the competition."

The guy laughs, melting into something... softer. "Jeez. Sorry. I knew that asshole wasn't going to show up." He runs a hand through that bouncy head of hair. Probably silky, smooth to the touch.

The guy offers his other hand, and when Billy reaches out to shake he can't help but notice how even the man's callouses have a sort of plushness to them.

"'s Billy."

"Steven! Well, Steve."

Billy swallows.

He sturdily pats the matte canteen framing. “You from the South?”

Steve gives a crooked smile. “What makes you say that?”

“Nothing. Just the beignets and chicken and waffles and all—thought maybe you were bringing a slice of home out West, or something. Soul food with soul.”

Something a little prickly comes out in the way Steve purses his lips. “Nah, it’s just good food to me. No laws against making good food, right?”

Billy blinks. Licks his teeth. Smiles, sharply. “Fair enough, pretty boy.”

The morning is gorgeous. A couple kids on roller skates zoom past. Some vacationing college students are getting sweet talked into Mrs. Ruiz’s empañada stall. Billy wets his lips.

Steve just, *fucking*, looks at him. Like, soft-ish, but ruffled. Impatient, even. *Well*.

“I’ll just cut to the chase. Don’t want to take up much more of your precious time.” Billy hooks his thumbs through his belt loops, rocking back on his heels. “You’re in the wrong spot, amigo.”

Pretty Boy’s brow crinkles, bitchy. “I called the city manager before I got here. They can’t kick me out.”

“No, s’not illegal. Actually, this is *my* spot.”

The pissy look makes a re-appearance. “Dude, get over yourself.”

“You think I’m joking, pretty boy?”

“*Stop* with the damn—*ugh*. Look, I got here first, and you can’t force me to move. So just, like. Fuck off, please.”

*First*. Something in Billy’s gut *twists*. He jabs a thumb back at his and Ma’s old Citroen.

“Our truck has been feeding this neighborhood since you were pissing daddy’s Egyptian cotton sheets. *Please*, don’t make me ask you again.”

Steve pokes his head around to look in the direction of Billy’s finger. His eyes widen.

“*That one?*” He nods at Billy’s old van, sounding equal parts alarmed and incredulous. And—

*Sir. Are you fucking serious right now?*

First Billy was peeved by the parking spot, but now it’s a whole new issue that’s going to blow his top. This guy is farting around in a set of vehicles equivalent to Billy’s entire life savings. And, *fucking—*

The first truck Ma bought wasn’t anything like Harrington’s daddy’s premium stainless steel food factory on wheels. Nope. It was a junker, loaned to them on the weekends by the Vietnamese evangelical group that was renting the business space below their crappy apartment.

They were dead broke, back then. Hell, Ma and Billy had practically survived on grilled cheese alone during those bone-thin years when they’d only just run away from Neil.

That was fifteen years ago, and *Sunshine’s* has long since become a staple on this three mile strip of San Diego beachfront. And what do they serve? Why *grilled cheese*, of course—first just classic American, and now everything from bulgogi-mozzarella to lamb-feta. Apparently it will always be the backbone upon which their survival depends.

Sometimes, God has a middle schooler’s sense of humor.

Point is, there’s a *soul* to their work. The town’s known Billy since he was growing in his milk teeth and getting them punched out by the homophobic fuckheads from down the block. He’s a thread in the community. Ma is counted among one of their matriarchs.

There’s a give and take to this kind of life. And as far as Billy’s seen—between the entitlement and the rich-boy-mobile and the prissy princess attitude—Steve’s all take.

For Ma's sake, Billy forces himself to walk away from fucking *Stevie's Bees* without throwing hands—teeth grit, fists balled. For the first time in four years, *Sunshine's* sets up shop on the wrong end of Cecilia Avenue.

When Billy rumbles home that night, a massive chunk of his sales drained by the glitzy new food truck on *their* street, it takes an hour of soaking in the tub to decompress the hot air in his bones. He shuffles up to his mom's room with his wet curls lazily piled atop his head.

Ma, being Ma, can tell something's wrong immediately.

"Sunshine, who pissed in your cornflakes?"

She trails her thumb under his eye, brushing away imaginary tears. That's good. She must be doing a lot better today, to have her shitty sense of humor up and kicking again.

"Nothing you should worry about, Ma. Just some Rockefeller *princess* giving me trouble today."

She hums. "That Harrington boy, right? Steven."

Billy chokes. "You *knew* that trust fund asshole was coming? Thanks for the warning."

Ma chuckles. Slaps his thigh. "I heard it from the grapevine. Haven't you learned? Ain't nobody comes into this town that us old ladies don't hear about first."

He wilts a little. "You ain't old yet, Ma."

She grins. "I know, baby. I know." Her lips purse. "Princess, huh? He did look awfully pretty standing by his daddy on those magazine covers. Nice hair. Brown eyes..."

"Ma."

"... a little pale, though. Looks like he might need some *sunshine* in his life."

“*Ma.*”

Her laugh is smokier than the Reds she used to burn right through during double shifts at the bar. There’s something about it that always mellows Billy out, keeps him level.

So, before finally tucking her in that night and settling down himself, Billy makes her a promise, *Yes, Ma. I’ll be good*, and resolves to get to Cecilia Av two hours earlier than he’d arrived that morning. He’ll just have to edge this guy out with persistence—show him that Billy’s not giving him an inch, not about to roll over for someone that’s been in town for all of five seconds.

Everything’s gonna be *fine*. Same as always.

Of course, it’s a little harder for Billy to convince himself of these assurances a month later, when a cop and Mrs. Ruiz are clawing at his back to keep Billy from choking Steve out and to prevent Steve from redoubling Billy’s concussion with his sneakers.

All the while, Billy’s flip flops are *weeping*.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thanks for reading, and don't be shy to take to the comments! This clown thrives on your feedback. DM @cherry-sorry on Tumblr.



## 2. Chapter 2

Steve spends the end of his first month in Cali getting his mugshot taken, having his shoelaces confiscated, and pissing in a small plastic jar. In a concrete bathroom. *In the middle of a police bullpen.*

The bathroom's got no door, either, so his dick and balls are probably dangling right at the edge of the captain's peripheral vision as the older man dully logs in Steve's information. Steve's not too pressed about it, though. He's far too busy fussing over the little puffs of blood leaking out of his dick and turning his urine this lovely shade of orange. Hargrove had really nailed him good.

Steve hopes that the outline of his Converse's sole bruises *perfectly* on that asshole's forehead.

*Oh*, and if his parents ask, Steve's having a *wonderful time*. No need to worry. *Yes, mom*, the view is just like your honeymoon photos. And the people? Fucking *angelic*. Wish you could be here.

When Steve's bladder runs dry, he's only made it about three-fourths of the way to the bolded line on the jar. And, like, he doesn't know what the procedure is for analyzing drug usage in *piss*. Do they run the whole sample through a machine that spits out all the answers at once? Or do they need to set aside separate amounts for each possible drug? Three drops for the weed test, two for heroin. *What if there's not enough?*

Steve doesn't want to wait another hour to whip out his dick again and try to squeeze out, like, a *millimeter* of urine.

So he peeks over at the captain to make sure he's not, fucking, *staring him out*, then turns on the sink and lets a couple drips raise the water level to the line that the nice desk attendant had pointed to.

Of course, when Steve seals the sample, tucks his dick away, and turns around, Hargrove is gaping at him from where he's getting his fingerprints taken like Steve's some kind of *moron*.

*Whatever.* The only good news is that, *yes*, Steve can just make out the swirls of his All-Stars in Hargrove's purpling forehead.

The guy must follow Steve's eyeline, or just feel well enough to want to *fuck* with him as much as usual, cause he whips out his free hand and throws Steve the bird. His middle finger is splinted and bandaged. His nose is taped.

Surprisingly, his curls, though rumpled, are just as fluffed and lovely as ever. Cecilia Avenue's own Rapunzel in cut-off shorts.

The lady cop holding Hargrove's hand to the scanner glances up boredly to see who he's flicking off. She gives Steve's bedraggled appearance and his orange piss sample a once over and *fucking snorts*.

*Which*—very fucking *uncool*. Steve doesn't understand how he keeps attracting the attention of assholes. Or at the very least, *bringing out* the asshole in otherwise tolerable people.

And he's not just talking about Hargrove (though Steve very much doubts that Hargrove could *ever* be tolerable in *any* setting). No, this has been happening to Steve for years. Like, *fucking*—

Like Nancy. She's a good person. She *is*. She's sweet and intensely considerate and whip smart. She was the president of Hawkins High's *Reading Rocks!* outreach program, for God's sake. She volunteers at food drives on the weekends and she escorted Dustin to Homecoming when he was still just a little dingus dipshit with no date.

She's great, normally. It's just that with Steve, she's a nitpicky control freak who gaslights him and sleeps with Will's older brother.

His mom and dad are the same way. Everyone they've ever met is left singing their praises. So kind, so generous, *so lucky of you to have parents like that, Steven*. It's just that when they're around their son, they drink a little too much and comment on hobbies he's given up months ago and plan business trips during the holidays and his birthday.

It's fine, really. He's a big boy. He can handle people being shitty. It's

just the pretense of people acting *blameless* that fucks with him. Like, *Steven, what are you talking about? Of course we're trying.* Or, *Steve, I've barely even talked to Jonathan. You're just being a dick.*

That's not something that Steve has the patience to deal with anymore. He still loves Nance and his folks and the *kids*. He still talks to them all the time, *but*. He just couldn't stay. So he packed his bags, dug into his early inheritance for a state-of-the-art kitchen on wheels to kickstart his new career, and fucked right off to the West coast.

"New in town?"

That's why, when some peacocking, trashy beach babe with his ass vacuum-sealed to his khakis strides up to him and starts gaslighting him about *spot ownership* and where or what he's *allowed* to serve, *well—*

*He isn't exactly Hargrove's cheerleader.*

Like, Steve knows that he's loaded. He knows how lucky he is to have the full freedom and financial backing to succeed in any career he deigns to pursue. But the one thing that he genuinely, deeply *loves* is cooking.

It's all his grandmother's fault. When Nonna immigrated to the US and got shoved into an arranged marriage with his grandfather, she dedicated the next forty-five years of housewifery to mastering the encyclopedia of American cuisine. Her favorite pastime, and subsequently Steve's, was in the preparation of pastries and breaded comfort food. He still remembers the shape of her smile over his shoulder as his chubby fingers twirled his first molasses pretzel.

So this *thing*? This whole food truck *pipe dream* that his parents have written off as a phase and that Nance worries is some mental breakdown? This is one of the first things he's ever done that he's truly going to fight for, tooth and claw.

Fortunately, *Billy*, because of fucking *course* this ratty bastard's name is *Billy*, has the basic decency to fuck off when Steve asks.

Unfortunately, the asshole is on *his* end of Cecilia Avenue the very

next morning. The dick lowers his aviators a hair, nodding at Steve with a lollipop packed in one cheek.

“Well, hey there, Stevie boy. Fancy seeing you on my strip of paradise.”

“Listen, *Buddy*—”

“*Billy*, but okay.”

“—I don’t know if your mom dropped you on the head too many times as a baby, but I wasn’t joking yesterday: I’m not going anywhere.”

Billy tuts, picking at his nails. “Looks like you already have gone somewhere.” He gestures at *Stevie’s Bees* parked haphazardly at the other, *worse* end of the street. “Better luck next time.”

Fine. Steve figures he’ll just out-*petty* the guy—get there at the ass crack of dawn and take back the spot again.

*Except*, pettiness seems to be a well-practiced part of that asshole’s repertoire. He’s there at 5:30 am, blasting this weird blend of metal rock and vaporware with his stupid, fucking, *ringlets* piled up in a golden mess.

He’s there before the sun’s up the day after that, too. And the day after. And the next three days. And the next God damn week and a half from morning through to lunch. They both tend to fuck off and explore the neighboring blocks at dinnertime, but the big bucks are *always* made during the lunch rushes.

And there’s only one end of Cecilia Avenue that opens up sweetly right at the beginning of this boardwalk that all the locals and niche tourists trickle through. The other side of the boardwalk is flanked by a street with a little health clinic and a government building and *special parking regulations*. But that *one* end of Cecilia Av nicks right into a precious vein of business at the very heart of this neighborhood. Steve *needs* that spot if he’s going to make a name for himself in this community.

He gets up earlier and earlier, but the other bastard is always

anticipating him.

By the end of the second week, Billy's got a yoga mat and an open cooler rolled out at 4:20 am, doing downward facing dog in a crop top and these lavender yoga pants that hug his thighs *and*—

Steve is *done*.

"I give, okay?" Steve marches up to *Sunshine's* holding up a white napkin tied to a spork. Billy twists around, calves flexing. That one loose curl on his forehead dangles, a little damp.

"You *give*?" He smirks. Throws a thumb over his shoulder. "Alright. Pack your bags, then. I hear there's another boardwalk three blocks over with some decent space. Sayonara."

"No, you *meathead*." Steve runs a tired hand down his face, dropping his makeshift flag. All these early mornings have grated on his skin. He's got no fucking idea how Billy ends up strutting around still looking so dewy every day. "Look, I just. I want to buy the spot from you, okay?" Billy turns to him fully, absolutely expressionless.

"I'll pay you a stipend every month. Think of it as a rental fee. You're the landlord, and I get the short end of the stick. Fair?"

Billy's quiet. He licks his lips, opens and closes his mouth. His eyes are so dark. You can't even really tell how blue they are until the sun comes out, when that teasing pinked velvet of dawn gives way to full daylight. Then he's *really* dangerous.

Billy finally looks back at his own battered HVan and rubs a palm across the scraped-up exterior. The paint job is lovingly tended to, but still faded: a Madonna-esque figure ringed by sunlight and grain. The saint always dangling around Billy's neck winks in the barely-there light. He reaches into the cooler he's set up by the side of the truck, plucking out this alcoholic blend of root beer that looks hand-bottled. The label reads *Sunshine's*. Of course.

He turns back to Steve, grinning.

"No."

“No?”

“Nope.” Billy laughs. “I’m not just going to jump at the first offer you dangle in front of my nose. I’m sure that’s not something you’re used to, and I apologize for that, princess. But this is about *principles*. I know you think I’m just some white trash loser—”

“Woah, that is *not*—”

Billy holds up a warning hand. “There are things worth more than money to me. Like that pissy little look on your face right now.”

Steve plants his feet. Billy pokes his tongue through his teeth, delighted.

“I know what I stand for, pretty boy. Question is, do *you*?”

And *Steve*—Steve cannot believe the audacity. Maybe it’s a Middle America thing: the niceties and pussyfooting and decorum. Maybe it’s because he comes from money. But even in high school, toe to toe with *Tommy Motherfucking Hall*, he’s never had someone talk so much shit so directly, so *honestly* to his God damn face, and, *and*—

Something long dead finally wakes up in Steve’s chest, sharp and *warm*.

Billy must notice the shift, too, because he cocks his head and takes a deliberate step forward. He crowds Steve in, testing, but Steve doesn’t give an inch. At last, the other boy winks, and for once it’s not exactly obnoxious. “See you tomorrow, Harrington.”

The blond flicks his rootbeer bottle, *ding*, and returns to his calisthenics.

It’s a shame, really, because in that moment Steve is almost *charmed*. As much as Hargrove pisses him off, there’s something undeniably refreshing about all of this. Despite the *Harrington* part of his brain that’s screaming at him not to make an *ass* of himself, *not to collude with trash*, Steve finds that he wants to be challenged. He wants to be insulted and dared to rise to the occasion. He wants to surprise Hargrove, to knock him onto his ass. He *wants*—

And he's pretty sure Hargrove wants all of that, too.

But it's a shame, *remember*, because it's not even two weeks later that Hargrove and Steve are glaring at each other from opposite ends of the same holding cell in the county jail. The staffed nurse popped in for a moment to test Hargrove's eyes and reaction time. While he doesn't have a concussion, his forehead looks like the corner of a Pollock painting. Steve feels a zing of pride.

Petulantly, Billy tongues at his split lip. "Don't look so smug. I had you on your back and I know for a fact you've got rainbow nuts."

Steve huffs. Billy smirks. "What was that?"

"*EaT sHit*," Steve croaks, rubbing at his purpled throat, and Billy stifles a giggle. Things settle down again, Steve sending *highly*negative vibes in Hargrove's direction, until the curly-haired asshole turns to one of the dozen monitors flashing bail bonds numbers. He curses, quietly. When he turns to Steve again his brows are knit.

"Look. If you get out of here first, I need to... Could you get me out? Or, like, talk to Mrs. Gillian. She runs the ice cream shop on Cecilia. Or maybe—"

"*OH, as if, HaRgrOve. SpEnd the niGHt and mAybe we'LL tAlk.*"

Billy's eyes harden. His hands are fisted on his lap. "*Steve*. I cannot stay here."

Suddenly, a cop swings open the door to their cell, the thick steel colossus squealing pitifully on its hinges. "Steven Harrington?"

Steve pokes his tongue childishly through his teeth, mocking. "*SEe you LAtEr, RapUNzel.*" He hops up, swaggering straight up to the officer with his eyes squarely on the bullpen's exit. The woman stops him with a hand to the chest.

She examines him quizzically. "Where do you think you're going? There was a problem with your urine test. We'll need another sample."

Billy throws his head back and *howls*.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

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### 3. Chapter 3

First Billy *floats*, his tiny belly on a warm board as he crests tidal swells with Ma. Then he *falls*, snorting awake in the back of a van with a crick in his neck and a *God damn pretty boy* giving him a *wet willy*.

“—*illy, Billy, Billy*. Oh, hey. We're at your house, apparently.”

Billy's frozen for a second, still warm and sleep-fuffed with sand and fuzz in his brain, before he's savagely slapping away the cold finger in his ear and kicking at Steve's shins.

“Ow, *Jesus!* Hey, we just got out of jail, you dick. You want me to *un-drop* the assault charges?”

Ah yes, now it's all coming together again. He and Steve had been busy playing chicken in their shared cell, waiting to see who was going to shamefully call their mommy for help first. Because, being Gen Z "*airheads*," those were the only numbers in the world that they had memorized. It was getting pretty close, too, Steve crawling out of his skin from, like, *prison germs* and Billy growing increasingly desperate with the need to check up on Ma.

They were fit to dive for those landlines until finally *surprise, surprise* —Mrs. Ruiz posted both their bails. Yes, that's the same Mrs. Ruiz that waved over a cop and knocked Billy and Steve's heads together in the first place when they were trying to choke each other out. Funny lady.

And that wasn't the only lucky break the two boys stumbled into. At first, the county sheriff's office treated their little *tussle* as two counts of drunk and disorderly assault and disturbing the peace. Which, um?, *pretty rude of them to just, like, assume without a God damn breathalyzer, if you ask Steve*.

But after the *multiple* piss tests and *saintly Mrs. Ruiz* sweet talking the captain for an hour, the department chalked up this whole, fucking,

*kerfuffle* as merely the idiotic pissing contest of two dickhead teenagers. Lilly's kid, Billy, is a wild one after all. "But he's got a good heart, Chief."

Ultimately, the two of them had been given the option to either A) keep clawing at each other's throats like a couple of fuckheads, or B) mutually drop the charges. That's a tough call, for Billy. Harrington could sure use a slap on the ass from Johnny Law, *but ultimately*—

"Alright, boys. Into the damn car. I can't stand the sight of you two right now. Antonio, hasta Doña Lilly's casita, por fa." They pack into the catering delivery van parked out front, Mr. Ruiz waiting for them with a smile and cane sugar lemonades. Billy slips off to sleep real easy with something sweet in his belly and the a/c blowing all gentle on his sweaty brow.

He drifts to the thought of how many sandwiches he's going to have to pawn off to the entire block to keep the vendors from flicking his ear and shaking their heads at him.

Half an hour after that, he's viciously rubbing his shirt collar into his ear to remove any genetic traces of fucking *Steve*.

"We're at your house, apparently."

Billy sneers. "What do you mean "*apparently*"? You know damn well this is where I live after *what you did*." That is, what Steve did to earn Billy's hands around his neck.

Steve huffs, rolling his eyes. His voice had recovered greatly with a little time and that iced lemonade, and of course the first thing he uses it for is to talk absolute *shit*: "Oh, whatever. You don't have much of a leg to stand on after *destroying* my fucking tires. Thanks a lot for that, asshole."

And. *What the fuck*? Billy gapes. He faffs his hand around, pissy and still dizzy with sleep.

"What the hell are you talking about? Your, what, your *tires*? You think *I* did something to your *tires*?"

Steve crosses his arms, one-hundred-percent bitch as per usual. "Oh,

so you're going to tell me that the *shrapnel* wasn't you?"

Billy bares his teeth. "I don't know what the *fuck*—"

And that's about enough bullshit that Mrs. Ruiz can take for one car ride. She pounds the horn.

"Enough! Antonio, mi amor, park the car." She turns away from her husband. Flips around and jabs a wrinkled finger at him and then Harrington. "I'm not turning either of you *hooligans* loose on this poor neighborhood until you deal with whatever this stupid game is between the two of you. *Billy*—"

She glowers at him, simultaneously disappointed, pissed, and unfairly soft. The same look she'd given him after he'd broken a kid's skateboard and then his nose in seventh grade for calling Billy fucking *Fagatron*, the *limp transformer*. Something petulant rises up in Billy at that old look.

"—you first, baby. Que pasó?"

Billy, fucking. Like, he *hasn't*. He didn't do *anything* to deserve *Harrington* coming and—

"Niño, cough it up. What happened?"

*So, fucking finally, here's what happened.*

Despite himself, Billy starts looking forward to getting up at the ass crack of dawn to see Harrington's pissy indignance at losing the coveted Parking Spot. He likes digging in his attic for new and inventive ways to ruffle the guy's feathers, dusting off a yoga mat from Ma's postpartum workout craze and a pair of ludicrous leggings he's only ever worn on Halloween.

He especially likes it when Pretty Boy fights *back*. He likes it when Steve brings a boom box one day, blasting Top 100 pop hits that the tourists love and that Billy visibly *hates*. He likes the way that the brunette pops on his own pair of aviators and bops his head while cranking up the volume on those God awful radio tunes. He likes his dumb Members Only jacket that looks like it was yanked out of a varsity footballer's toy box from 1983. He likes his fire. He *likes*—

He likes the way Ma sits up a little higher, a little more bright-eyed, every morning and evening that week just to inquire about her favorite "Reality Soap Opera."

"Oo Sunshine, you look mighty worked up. How did the big bad newbie find a way to snub you this time?"

"He gave out Cosmopolitan's for a quarter each. And they weren't mixed with *Skull* or any shit like that. They were *Grey Goose*, Ma. How the hell did he even swing a liquor license from the city so quick? Probably, fuckin', shoved a wad of hundreds up Newsom's ass or something."

Ma's got one of those ugly, snort-y laughs when she's really tickled by something. It's terrible, and Billy wants to hear it every minute of the day, if he can. It's just like how Pavlov did it, ringing his bell right before he fed his dogs till Cujo would salivate at the sound alone.

Ma wipes the spittle from her lip and beams. "Wear somethin' red today. It'll bring out your eyes, even from down the street."

"Hush up and eat your sandwich."

Billy's a simple beast. He's just itching for a pretty face and a good time and Ma's atrocious laugh. For a couple of days there, he's got all three. But Billy's used to things turning to shit on the flip of a dime. Nothing good lasts too long. Not Daddy's patience or their finances or even *Ma*.

Billy's having the time of his life, the afternoon that it happens. He's beaten Harrington yet again to the Spot, and they've both gone all out in terms of *pageantry*.

Steve's wearing a damn suit, some midnight blue Gucci cut, and he's got his hair all coiffed and a bunch of poster board signs taped around his truck that say shit like "World-renowned," "Five Stars," and "Best in the Biz" in pretentious cursive.

Never one to be outdone, Billy is wearing a fucking cheerleading uniform. It's red, just like Ma recommended, and he's tied half his hair up into these two scrunchied pigtails. *Sunshine's* signature boozy

cream soda abounds, and Billy's got a Spotify *Hollaback Girl* playlist running on his shit speakers.

He and Harrington dazzle customers the entire day, only dropping their smiles to glare out at the opposing ends of Cecilia Av.

"Dude, you're slipping right out of that thing."

"Oh, so now I'm getting fashion advice from the Nickelodeon's Kids' Choice Awards? Eat my ass, Rich Boy."

"I mean, *when it's already halfway out of your skirt.*"

It's the most fun Billy's had since grade school.

He heads home that night on an unbelievable high, twirling his key ring and swaggering through the front door with the full expectation that Ma's going to snort like a pig when she sees his "athletic wear." Instead, Billy pads into the living room to the tune of whimpering. High and pained.

"... Ma?"

She's resting on the couch, which is hardly a surprise. That's been her evening pit stop for the past few weeks. She gets out of bed, pulls out the Tupperwares Billy's labeled *breakfast* and *round 2*, waters her flowers, sits on the deck, gets nauseous, and lies on the couch to watch tv and poke at her meals until Billy comes home or the dizziness harshly lulls her to sleep. Then he feeds her and carries her to bed, and the day begins again.

Radiation is a motherfucker.

The whimpering, though, is new. Billy lays a hand on her shoulder and shakes her, gently. "Ma, wake up." She does, eventually, and the whimpering grows exponentially louder until it finally graduates to *wailing*.

"*God, please! Make it stop!*"

"What is it? What's hurting?" He has to re-type 911 twice with sweaty thumbs.

*"My head! My fucking head!"*

She's still sobbing by the time the ambulance unloads her into the entrance of the ER, and an on-duty nurse tugs him away from the ominous stretch of hallway where Ma has been swallowed by a vacuum of fluorescent white noise. "Sir, please wait here while the doctors work."

You might expect Billy to bitch and throw hands and spit on the floor. He did, the first time. Thing is, he's been in this position too many times over the past few years to bite. He wipes his shaky palms down the front of his hoodie and settles onto one of the plastic cushions. It whines as he goes down.

There's only three other people in the ward's waiting area: an old lady who keeps rubbing the back of a weeping little boy with a bloody nose, and a sniffling man who's fallen asleep curled across a row of seats. There's a special kind of impotence in waiting for a stranger to fix your problems.

The lady looks up from her grandkid and shoots Billy an odd look.

Oh. Right. He undoes his pigtails. Fusses with the hem of his skirt.

Harrington was right—he really is slipping.

Two hours later, a familiar nurse is kind enough to inform him that his mother is doing well. Or, well enough, for now. She's been out of the Emergency theatre for half an hour. Her lungs had gotten *watery*. Filled up with fluid like bad water balloons. And water balloons don't make for good oxygen flow, particularly to the brain. And *bing bang boom*, your mother's half-dead but ready to see you know.

He's promptly scanned through to the proper wing, and immediately forgets his mom's room number as he steps through the automatic doors.

"Uh, excuse me. My mother was admitted here tonight. Can you direct me to her room? Her name's Lilly. Lilly Connell."

Ma is fuzzy with morphine when he shuffles in. She sucks in wrongly when she sees him. Wistful, and scared.

"Neil?"

Billy takes a breath. Sits. Slips a hand in hers.

"No. 'S just Billy." She blinks, slow, and her tired smile spreads like spilled milk. "Sunshine. Course it's you. I'd know that ratty head of curls anywhere." Billy's guts ache. He rubs swiftly under his eyes.

"Do I, uh. Do I look like him?"

"Mm. Hell no. Except for that jaw and this ugly thing." She thumbs weakly at his ratty mustache. She's been begging him to shave it for weeks. "You do sound a little like 'im, though. Strong, *bossy*." She jabs a finger in his side. "Real goofy-like, too. He was always so funny, before he got bad."

Her IV drips, agonizingly off-rhythm. Billy hums.

"I've never understood it, ya know?"

She squints. Dri-drip. "Understood what, baby?"

"Why you let me keep his name."

This is not the time or place for this conversation, but. What the fuck is there left to say about anything that *matters*? They're both sick to death of *kitty CAT* scans and oxy tubes and picking out rubber sheets because all the chemo's shaken up her insides. It's too much, and Billy feels about five years old right now, so. Ma licks her lips, and thinks back on teeth and nails and broken dishware. It's better than thinking of now, where she can't bite back at the hands of what's dragging her under.

"You were still such a tiny thing when I decided I'd had enough. I decided, and you had no say either way. I took away your whole world without your say-so. I didn't wanna take your name, too."

"*Ma, you're my world.*"

"You're just saying that cause you don't know any better. You *loved* your daddy. You know that? You weren't a born momma's boy. You were always 'Daddy, Daddy! Pick me up, throw me higher, tuck

me in.' You loved him best. But I just couldn't stand the thought of what might happen if I wasn't there to take his worst. I'm *sorry*. I am so, so sorry, love."

Billy squeezes her hand, nose scrunching like he's caught something awful. "*Shut up*, Ma. If you don't stop talking shit I'm gonna sic the nurses on you."

She barely takes a breath. "You might've had a new mom, too. If I hadn't dragged you down with me. Could've had a little brother or sister running around. You wouldn't have had to claw your way up and watch me burn myself to death from the inside—"

Billy cups a hand over her mouth, trembling. Salt and water trickles through his fingers like a leaky damn.

"I know that whatever good he would've done me can't measure up to the worst I've had to stomach since I've been with you. I can deal with waiting in the backs of bars or wearing the same ugly Goodwill sneakers to school or, *fucking*, growing tits at thirteen cause we could only afford chicken nuggets."

She paws off his hand, scandalized. "*William Rainn Hargrove—*"

"Cause he never would've loved me *the way I am*."

Ma's got nothing snappy to say to that. She licks her lips. Rubs at the flamboyant scrunchies on his wrist. Brings his knuckles up to her mouth for a kiss. Her lips are paper-dry.

"You may think I'm an angel, that I'm oh so superior to Neil, but I could've been better. You shouldn't have had to cover your ears in the bathtub while I was stripping down just to get money for groceries. You shouldn't have had to fight so hard, so long." She puts a finger to his lips. "No. Never give me those excuses." She pinches at his cheek, wiping at the dust of freckles. "And on top of all that, there's this one awful thing Neil and I have got in common. *Pride*."

That's bullshit. "That's *bullshit*." The IV squeals out another drop.

She shakes her head. "I'm so Goddamn proud of *you*. But I'm vain, too. And I don't—I don't want you to see me like this. It's bad enough,



farting around on the couch all day." She chuckles. "I *can't*. I can't have you here. My heart's not strong enough for that."

And now it's Billy's turn to have his lungs go bad.

"I'm a tough cookie, Sunshine. Go home. Get some sleep. Work. Come back tomorrow night or the day after, but don't stay. That'll really be the thing that kills me."

And, *and*.

The house is so flimsy without her. The walls are too thin, the wallpaper peeling. They'd bought the place four years ago, discounted from a friend of Ma's who was going back East. When they'd moved their few pitiful boxes of junk from the apartment to this tiny thing, Ma had twirled him around and called it *Westside Eden*.

He peels off his old swim team hoodie and the cherry red fucking *uniform* he'd borrowed from a hook-up at the strip club a few blocks over. They lay in a heap at his feet as he curls up on the couch and dreams of absolutely nothing at all.

The next day is just about as easy. He wakes up with a throbbing in his side, where Ma had poked him, and it eats at him with every passing second. He can't remember what he slips on top of his sticky, aching body.

Harrington is in a sailor uniform that morning, all tiny'n'tight shorts and a blue cap crowned atop his stupidly big tufts of hair. He keeps exclaiming "Ahoy!" to passing customers and warning of the "treacherous sea monster" by the boardwalk. It's cute. Billy barely glances at him the entire damn day.

When Pretty Boy splits to go on their usual dinnertime cruise around the neighborhood, Billy just stays on Cecilia Av. He plucks a drink out of the cooler in the back. Caramel cream soda, root beer, and mead. *Magnifique*. One bottle becomes two becomes a vague stack that Billy has begun haphazardly dropping out the passenger window. *Crack*. The street right beneath him is glittering, a constellation of teeth and stars.

Billy's done stupid things before, but one of the stupidest of all probably has to be right then and there, when he fumbles for the gear shift and manages to pinch around the keys.

Good thing Ma's not the only angel he's stuck with. It's *Mr.* Ruiz, all quiet and soft, who nicks the keys right out of Billy's hands. He'd stayed late to get the pastries ready and show his niece how to close up shop and clean the friers for the buñuelos and empañadas.

Antonio's leaning through the driver side window. The tips of his mustache are wet. His sideburns have gotten so much greyer, this past year.

"Mijo, no voy a dejar que mueras primero."

*Mijo.*

And, Billy *just...*

*I'm not going to let you die first.*

... melts into the man's gentle shove. He falls into the passenger side, and doesn't fight the knuckles that brush against his neck as he curls against the window. He looks down. The sharp edges and stars drift out to nothing at all but black asphalt as the Citroen rumbles home.

Antonio shoulders him kindly out of the car and tugs back his hair as he vomits into Ma's honeysuckles. His little niece, barely sixteen, has followed them in the *Las Hermanas* catering van. She idles in the driveway as her uncle manages Billy's dead weight. The blond crashes into his unmade bed like a train wreck on fire. He's barely conscious by the time Antonio readjusts him onto his side and sets a tall cup of water on the nightstand.

He dreams of teeth. And he wakes up, and sleeps again the rest of the day with his head pounding and his chest heavier than ever. The day after that, instead of turning onto Cecilia Av he goes to St. Cecilia's and sits with his Ma. "Hey there, Blue."

Again, and again and again, until practically the entire week is given to Ma rather than *Sunshine's*. Finally, a whole five days after she was checked in, he takes Ma home again. Even though it's the dead of

July, he lowers her onto her own bed with fuzzy socks and a warm blanket tucked tight. He kisses her good night long after she's already settled to sleep, and then slips into the bathroom to silently scream into the crumpled hospital bill.

Billy drags himself out of bed the next morning. He feels like a rat's unwashed ass, but if he doesn't compensate for the windfall losses of the ambulance and the emergency treatment, *well*. They're gonna be fucked in seven different directions.

He's lazy, getting dressed. An Everlast crop top, some ratty shorts, and his squeaky old Rainbows. Half his energy is spent on cooking up Ma's meals for this afternoon. He's already fucking *done* for the day by the time he stumbles outside at eleven am to find their precious truck *fucking destroyed*. Yes, the old engine still runs and the ancient suspension is still going strong. But the Madonna, that beautiful miracle of a portrait that their sweetheart neighbors had gifted to them when they were living off of microwaveable waste in a one-bedroom apartment, is soaked in bright yellow and black explosions of paint.

Black and yellow. *Fucking Harrington*.

Billy rages straight to Cecilia Av for one express purpose, and it's not to alleviate their Goddamn hospital bills. Once again, Rich Boy is parked in *Ma's* spot, handing out honeyed funnel cakes and pretzels in that damn polo and folded khakis.

Fuck. That.

Billy barrels out of his car and marches right up to Harrington's Westfalia with his fists balled. Harrington dismounts and crosses his arms. Square up, bitch.

"I'm gonna rip your God damn head off, pretty boy!"

And then he's kicking the asshole's nuts, and the dickhead is falling, and Billy's taking a sneaker to the guts and the chest and the *head*, but it's *okay* because the fuzziness that the kick gives his brain allows him just the right edge of psychosis to wrap his hands around Harrington's neck and *squeeze*.

Then there's cops and a staff nurse and a stuffy jail cell and,  
*that's everything that happened.* On Billy's end, at least.

Of course, he tells none of this to Mr. or Mrs. Ruiz or fucking *Harrington* as they idle in front of his shitty little house. He's too busy with thoughts of oxy tubes and the bleeding Madonna and *Fagatron the limp transformer* to act like anything other than a ten-year-old with his buck teeth kicked right out of his head.

Instead of the truth, all he says is, "The loaded prick had it coming."

Surprising Billy yet again, it's *Mr.* Ruiz who shoves them all out of the car. Mrs. Ruiz, *Adriana*, questions him as he marches the two boys, kicking and screaming, down Ma's driveway.

"Tonio, que pasa?"

"Ya, Doña Lilly voy a solucionar esto."

*Miss Lilly will sort this out.*

Shit, damn, and fucking hellfire.

Billy jerks against the Ruiz's now *combined* efforts. "Woah woah, wait. *Don't—!*"

First Billy floats, and then he falls. First he's clawing and pleading with the couple at just the theoretical idea of his mother, and then he's standing right in the foyer as Ma's smiling at the four of them, his filthy flip flops pressed into their carpet and her nose scrunched happily with a cannula curled from her upper lip over both ears. She shoulders up the tiny backpack holding her oxygen tank and rises to her feet, the couch armrest acting as her crutch.

"I've heard some mighty big rumors today. Now tell me, which one of you *morons* was caught disturbing my peace?"

*Surprise, surprise.*

Billy's a simple beast. All he wants is a good time, a pretty face, and for Ma not to bury him under the marigolds out back.